

~~S-E-C-R-E-T~~

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

1 July 1963

25X1 MEMORANDUM FOR: Mr. Allan Evans, State (INR)
[redacted] USA (DIA)
Lt. Colonel J.R. Voseipka, USA (ACSI)
25X1 Captain A.W. Long, USN (ONI)
Lt. Colonel R.D. Day, USAF (AFNIEBB)
[redacted] USAF, Chief,
Policy Staff, NSA

SUBJECT : SNIE 53-2-63: SITUATION IN SOUTH
VIETNAM

1. The attached draft estimate is forwarded for review.
2. It is requested that your representatives meet with us at 1000, Friday, 5 July, at CIA Headquarters, to discuss this draft.

25X1 [redacted]
Executive Officer
National Estimates

DISTRIBUTION B

GROUP 1
Excluded from automatic
downgrading and
declassification

~~S-E-C-R-E-T~~

~~S-E-C-R-E-T~~

C E N T R A L I N T E L L I G E N C E A G E N C Y

1 July 1963

SUBJECT: SNIE 53-2-63: THE SITUATION IN SOUTH VIETNAM

SCOPE NOTE

NIE 53-63, "Prospects in South Vietnam," dated 17 April 1963 was particularly concerned with the progress of the counterinsurgency effort, and with the military and political factors most likely to affect that effort. The primary purpose of the present SNIE is to examine the implications of recent developments in South Vietnam for the stability of the country, the viability of the Diem regime, and its relationship with the US.

CONCLUSIONS
(To Follow)

~~S-E-C-R-E-T~~

GROUP 1
Excluded from automatic
downgrading and
declassification

S-E-C-R-E-T

DISCUSSION

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The two chief problems which have faced the Government of South Vietnam (GVN) since its birth in 1954, have been: (a) to forge an independent nation out of a disparate populace with no tradition of loyalty to a government in Saigon, and (b) to counter the menace of Hanoi's aggressive designs -- pursued since 1960 by a campaign of active insurgency and guerrilla war. In attempting to cope with these problems, the GVN has been hampered by its lack of confidence in and its inability to engage the understanding and support of a considerable portion of the Vietnamese people -- including large segments of the educated classes and the peasantry. In recent weeks these inadequacies and tensions in the South Vietnamese body politic have been further revealed and intensified.

- 2 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

II. THE BUDDHIST AFFAIR

2. Religion has always posed an obstacle to real communication between the people of South Vietnam, 70 to 80 percent of whom are at least nominally Buddhist, and the top leadership of the GVN. The latter is Roman Catholic in its personal makeup and in much of its philosophy, accords preferential treatment to Catholics in its appointment practices, and has attempted to impose by law a Catholic code of morality which runs counter to many beliefs, traditions, and practices of South Vietnam's non-Catholic populace. This situation has produced a continuing series of irritants regarded by South Vietnam's Buddhists as evidence of deliberate religious discrimination, even though these grievances may in large measure result more from thoughtlessness or misplaced zeal on the part of minor officials than from conscious GVN policy.

3. In April 1963, the GVN ordered its provincial officials to enforce a longstanding but generally ignored regulation prohibiting the public display of religious flags. As it happened, this edict was issued just prior to Buddha's birthday (8 May), a major Buddhist festival, and just after Papal flags had been prominently flown during a series of officially encouraged celebrations commemorating the 25th anniversary of the ordination of

- 3 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

Ngo dinh Thuc, Diem's brother, the Archbishop of Hue. A protest demonstration developed in Hue on 8 May, which was dispersed by fire from a Civil Guard unit. In the ensuing melee eight persons were killed, including several children. The GVN has blamed this incident on Viet Cong agitation, and its subsequent stiff-necked handling of this incident has sparked a national crisis. The Buddhists, hitherto disorganized and nonprotesting, have shown considerable cohesion and force -- enough to evoke a set of "compromise" agreements from President Diem on 16 June.

4. For the moment, the Buddhist movement remains under the effective control of moderate bonzes who have refused to accept support from or countenance cooperation with any of Diem's would-be political opponents, Communist or non-Communist, and appear to be trying to ensure that the Buddhists live up to their part of the bargain. This leadership gave the GVN a period of grace (to expire about the end of June) in which to demonstrate that it was negotiating in good faith, but has announced that if such evidence is not forthcoming within that period, protests and demonstrations will resume.

- 4 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

5. Despite Buddhist restraint in the political exploitation of the affair, it has obvious political overtones. It has aroused widespread popular indignation and could well become a focal point of general disaffection with the Diem government. It provides an issue on which most of Diem's non-Communist opponents (even including some Catholics) can find common ground of agreement. There is considerable evidence that the issue itself and, even more, the GVN's handling of it to date has occasioned restiveness at virtually all levels of the GVN's military and civil establishment, both of whose lower and middle echelons are largely staffed by Buddhists. In some cases civil servants seem to have ignored or tempered GVN instructions and superiors have on occasion evaded their assigned task of propounding the official GVN line to their subordinates. We are not sure how various army or police units would react, for example, if ordered to fire on a demonstration headed by Buddhist bonaes. In any case recent developments are causing many GVN officials, both civilian and military, to re-examine their relation with and the limits of their loyalty to the Diem regime.

6. The Buddhist affair appears to have given considerable heart to the various non-Communist political opposition splinter groups. There also appears to be a growing feeling among former

- 5 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

supporters of the regime that Diems position may have been permanently and dangerously impaired. There has been a fresh spate of coup rumors and some evidence of potentially serious military disaffection, especially in the air force. However, we have no evidence that the various opposition groups have been able to form new or effective alliances with one another.

7. The Buddhist issue is obviously a windfall for the Communists, but so far they have done relatively little to exploit it. They may have penetrated the Buddhist clergy to some extent, but do not presently seem to be in control of the Buddhist movement. Nor do we believe that they expect as much influence in Buddhist circles as GVN pronouncements would suggest. To date the Buddhist crisis does not appear to have had any appreciable affect on the continuing counterinsurgency effort or on the daily battles with the Viet Cong in the countryside.

8. The Buddhist crisis has also hurt the GVN internationally, with important effects upon the future success of US policy towards southeast Asia. Protests are growing in other predominantly Buddhist countries, with the implication that the US shares responsibility with the Diem government for the crisis. Questions have been raised in the UN and more are likely to be forthcoming. In other

- 6 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

countries, including the US, the crisis has given new stimulus to criticism of US policy on the grounds that the US supports an oppressive and unrepresentative regime.

9. The future course of the Buddhist affair will be largely determined by the GVN's actions in the near term. It is likely that the issues recently raised can be resolved if the GVN executes its portion of the negotiated bargain. Politically sophisticated segments of South Vietnamese society, Buddhists included, are mindful of Diem's past practice of often using negotiations as a stall for time and of making promises in order to weather an immediate crisis. The real danger in the present situation is that Diem may be tempted to employ the tactics which have served him well in the past but could prove disastrous if essayed this time. Even if the concrete issues presently under dispute should be speedily resolved, the Buddhist affair has shaken the -- or made manifest -- rents in the fragile structure of South Vietnamese national unity.

III. THE EFFECT OF RECENT DEVELOPMENTS ON US-GVN RELATIONS

10. US-Vietnamese relationships have always been subject to more or less GVN concern over the implications of the US presence, and from time to time the GVN has felt moved to restrict US activities and presence in South Vietnam. This attitude springs partly

S-E-C-R-E-T

from legitimate, if hypersensitive, concern for Vietnam's recently acquired sovereignty, partly from the Diem government's suspicion of US intentions toward it, and primarily from the regime's belief that the extensive US presence is setting in motion political forces in South Vietnam which could eventually threaten Diem's political primacy.

11. The Buddhist affair erupted at one of these periods of GVN sensitivity, and the strain has been aggravated by subsequent events. The GVN's initial handling of the issue gave the US ground for serious embarrassment and concern which, in turn, produced a succession of forceful US demarches. Given the character and personality of Diem and Nhu, it is virtually certain that these US actions have been bitterly resented and that the Buddhist actions themselves were considered at least indirectly due to the US presence. These actions are likely to increase the GVN's desire to reduce that presence.

12. A key role in this regard will be played by Brother Nhu. He has always been Diem's chief political lieutenant, but the years since 1954 have witnessed a steady accretion of Nhu's personal power and authority -- an accretion due partly to circumstance and primarily to deliberate effort on Nhu's part. Nhu has political

- 8 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

ambitions of his own and almost certainly envisages himself as his brother's successor. For a variety of reasons, Nhu has long privately viewed the US with some hostility and suspicion. American criticism of the GVN has especially irritated Nhu, for he is aware that he and his wife are often its primary targets. Above all, although Nhu is aware that the US is fully committed to supporting his brother, he almost certainly has doubts that support would be transferred to him.

13. In the negotiations with the Buddhists, Nhu urged his brother to take a firm line and is by his own statement wholly out of sympathy with the concessions made. On the basis of past performance, we think it unlikely that he will help to implement the settlement; his influence on Diem will be rather in the direction of delaying and weaseling on commitments, a tendency to which Diem himself is customarily disposed.

IV. THE OUTLOOK

14. Even if relations between the GVN and the Buddhists are smoothed ones, the general discontent against the Diem regime, which the crisis has exacerbated and brought to the fore, would persist. Over the next few months, therefore, South Vietnam will probably

- 9 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

remain in a state of domestic political tension -- and one in which the chances of a non-Communist assassination or coup attempt against Diem will be greater. One also cannot exclude the possibility of an attempted Communist coup, but a Communist attempt will have appreciably less likelihood of success so long as the majority of the government's opponents and critics remain -- as they are now -- even more anti-Communist than anti-Diem.

15. Any attempt to remove Diem will almost certainly be directed against Nhu as well, but in the event that Nhu survives Diem, we are virtually certain that he would attempt to gain powers -- perhaps in the first instance by manipulating the constitutional machinery. We do not believe that Nhu's bid would succeed, despite the personal political base Nhu has been endeavoring to build through the Republican Youth (of which he is the overt, uniformed head), the strategic hamlet program (whose directing Interministerial Committee he chairs) and in the army. He and his wife have become too much the living symbols of all that is disliked in the present regime for Nhu's personal political power to long outlive his brother. There might be a struggle with no little violence, but unless Diem were assassinated as part of a well-organized coup plot, enough of the army would probably rally behind the constitutional succession

- 10 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

to make Vice President Tho at least Diem's interim successor. Under such circumstances Tho might well be controlled by some form of military junta.

16. A successful non-Communist coup would become more likely in the event renewed GVN/Buddhist confrontation should lead to large-scale demonstrations in Saigon. More or less prolonged riot and general disorder would probably result -- with the security forces confused over which side to support. Under such circumstances, a small group, particularly one with prior contingency plans for such an eventuality, might prove able to topple the government. Conversely, a continued or resumed truce between the GVN and the Buddhists would serve to reduce the likelihood of such an overthrow.

17. A non-Communist successor regime might prove no more effective than Diem in fighting the Viet Cong; indeed it might well prove considerably less effective. Nevertheless, even though the counterinsurgency effort would probably be disrupted for awhile in any case, Diem's ouster or replacement would not necessarily prove fatal to the war effort. A different regime which could start political life with a clean slate but still profit from the many

- 11 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

achievements and counterinsurgency accomplishments of Diem's administration might prove able to engender a greater degree of unity and popular support than the present GVN.

- 12 -

S-E-C-R-E-T